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ABSTRACT

This document has been prepared by the department of education to assist school administrators in gaining a greater understanding of the needs assessment process in general and to examine the specific requirements for assessing needs contained in the South Carolina Education Finance Act and the state legislature joint resolution on the matter. The general discussion focuses on the three major steps in a needs assessment--determining what conditions actually exist, determining what conditions should exist, and analyzing the discrepancy between what is and what should be. Four pages of sample worksheets that can be used to assist administrators in organizing the data required by the act and the joint resolution are included. (Author/IRT)

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NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Requirement of the South Carolina
Education Finance Act of 1977

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Cyril B. Busbee, State Superintendent of Education
South Carolina Department of Education

1978

EA 010 483

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

This past summer the Governor signed into law the South Carolina Education Finance Act of 1977. Subsequently, on March 15, 1978 the South Carolina Legislature passed a Joint Resolution prescribing dates for the preparation of certain reports necessary for implementation of the Act. The Resolution requires the preparation of portions of the annual school report by school principals and the annual district report by local boards of trustees. The portions to be completed in these reports must reflect needs, goals, and objectives for both the individual school and the district as a whole.

As a result of the emphasis the Finance Act and the Joint Resolution place on delineating needs, great interest in the process and procedures for assessing needs has been generated among school administrators. This document, therefore, has been prepared by the Department of Education to assist school administrators in gaining a greater understanding of the needs assessment process. Its purpose is twofold: 1) to examine the needs assessment process in general terms, and 2) to examine the specific requirements for assessing needs in the South Carolina Education Finance Act and the Joint Resolution.

THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS

An educational need may be defined as a problem or condition which is identified as a result of comparing existing conditions with conditions which should exist. Stated in another way, an educational need is the measurable

discrepancy, or gap, between "what is" and "what should be." A needs assessment is the process of measuring this discrepancy. The process of assessing needs involves three major steps: 1) determining what conditions actually exist, 2) determining what conditions should exist, and 3) analyzing the discrepancy between "what is" and what should be."

Determining Existing Conditions

Determining existing conditions is accomplished primarily through collecting and analyzing data. Two questions immediately come to mind and must be answered before the data collection process can begin: What data should be collected, and what aspects of the educational program should be assessed? There are an unlimited number of potential assessment areas within any given school; since time and resources are usually limited, it is helpful to identify key target areas about which data should be collected.

In most needs assessments data are usually collected in three general areas. One area to be examined is the resources used in the school or district. Typical items in this category might be classroom facilities, instructional materials, and instructional staff. Assessment in this area is generally aimed at evaluating the condition of the resources used to create the educational environment. A second area to be assessed is the educational curriculum for the school or district. Assessment of this area attempts to examine the quality and effectiveness of the curriculum. Student outcomes is a third area usually assessed in most needs assessments. The actual measurement of student performance is assessed in this area. Depending on the scope of the

assessment, data may be collected for all three areas or for only one or two of them. A comprehensive needs assessment would include an indepth investigation of numerous items in each of the three major assessment areas. On the other hand, when resources are scarce the assessment may be limited to examination of only a few items in only one assessment area. When planning a needs assessment, it is essential that the decision concerning what areas to assess and the scope of the assessment be made prior to any data collection efforts.

Obviously, the methods to be used for collecting data will be determined largely by the kind of data desired for the assessment and by the resources available. For example, if student performance is to be assessed, then student test data such as CTBS scores must be collected and examined. In some instances, the most appropriate method of collecting data may require simply gathering factual information from a number of sources and organizing it in a manner useful to the individual analyzing the data. In other cases, however, data may not be readily available. For example, a school or district may wish to examine the self-concept of handicapped students but may not have an assessment instrument for this purpose. When this situation occurs specific procedures for obtaining the needed information must be devised. A member of the school or district staff may be assigned to this task or the services of an outside consultant may be secured.

Many schools and school districts are interested in determining the community's opinion of the needs of the educational system. Survey instruments

developed by staff members or consultants may be utilized effectively for this purpose. Telephone and face-to-face interviews, although their cost sometimes may be prohibitive, are also excellent methods for obtaining perceptual data.

Determining What Should Be

The second major step in assessing educational needs is determining what conditions should exist in the educational system. Achievement of this task involves setting acceptable standards which can be used, in a sense, as a measuring stick or a point of reference. Prior to beginning this task at least two questions should be answered: Who will set the standards, and what level will the standards represent? Regarding the first question, standards can be determined by the local board of trustees, the superintendent, the professional staff, the community, or by any combination of these groups. However, many school systems have found that involving individuals from each of these groups is the most appropriate procedure for establishing district standards.

The question concerning the level of standards is a key issue in this process. A standard may represent a minimum, an average, or maximum level. State and federal legislation as well as State Board of Education regulations may specify levels for standards by requiring that certain levels of performance be achieved or that certain conditions exist in the school system. In many assessment areas, however, there are no guidelines to specify the level at which standards should be set for each school or district. Consequently, the decision concerning the level a standard should represent is left to the

discretion of the individuals involved in the needs assessment process.

As standards are specified consideration should be given to the data to be collected in the needs assessment. For each item to be assessed there should be a standard as well as data to describe the condition of the item. Discrepancy analysis cannot take place unless there is a standard which represents "what should be" and data which describes "what actually exists." In addition, the "what should be" and "what is" must be stated in comparable terms. In other words, if assessing student performance in reading, the data to describe "what is" may be expressed in terms of a school or district percentile ranking. The desired reading performance or the "what should be" should also be stated in terms of the same percentile scale.

Analyzing the Discrepancy

Needs assessment has been defined as the process of measuring the gap or discrepancy between "what should be" and "what is." Stated in mathematical terms:

WHAT SHOULD BE - WHAT IS = EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

In theory, once standards are set and comparable data are collected, analyzing the discrepancy is simply a process of subtracting the "what is" from the "what should be." When standards and data are stated in quantifiable terms, this simple formula holds true. In reality, however, the process of analyzing the discrepancy is sometimes more complex. Standards and data cannot always be specified in quantifiable terms, and as a result, subjective judgements must be made by individuals responsible for identifying needs. When subjective judgements are necessary, they should not be made

haphazardly, but should be based on the results of careful study of all the information available concerning the item being assessed.

When the discrepancies or educational needs have been determined they should be ranked to provide a basis for resource allocation. Most schools and districts do not have sufficient resources to adequately address all the identified needs. Ranking the needs in order from most crucial to least crucial will assist administrators in making wise decisions concerning the allocation of limited resources.

Once educational needs have been identified they can form the basis for upgrading public education. To bring about educational improvement, however, a plan of action is needed. Needs assessment is one integral step in a multi-step planning process. This process includes, once needs have been identified, specifying objectives to alleviate needs, selecting appropriate strategies to accomplish objectives, selecting and implementing strategies, and evaluating progress made. Needs assessment forms the foundation for the planning process and provides a basis for bringing about educational progress in the State's public school system.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND THE SOUTH CAROLINA EDUCATION FINANCE ACT OF 1977

Section 6(3)(b) of the Education Finance Act requires that each school principal prepare an annual report which includes a section on recommending programmatic improvements. This portion of the report is to present an explicit statement of the needs of students, define specific goals and objectives, and propose an identifiable strategy for priorities in the

expenditure of funds to achieve the objectives. Further, Section 6(4)(d) requires that each school district board of trustees maintain an ongoing systematic evaluation of the education program needs in the district and develop a comprehensive annual and long-range plan for meeting the identified needs.

Careful examination of Section 6(3)(b) and (4)(d) indicates that the purpose of conducting a needs assessment is to provide a data base for 1) recommending needed programmatic improvements, and 2) developing long-range plans to meet the identified needs. In addition, these two Sections reveal certain requirements or specifications for conducting the assessment. Both parts require that goals and objectives be defined. The needs assessment, therefore, should be structured in such a manner that goals and objectives can be specified easily once needs have been identified.

Generally speaking, goals and objectives are statements of what action will be taken to eliminate identified needs. More specifically, a goal is a statement of broad, general direction toward which a system is constantly moving. Usually a goal represents an ideal state or condition which may never actually be attained. An objective is a statement which describes a specific measurable end to be accomplished within a specified time frame; or in more simple terms, an objective is a statement of <u>what</u> will be done and <u>when</u> it will be done. A direct relationship should exist between needs, objectives, and goals; the accomplishment of an objective will assist in eliminating a need and moving the system closer to achieving the desired goal.

The second requirement in the Act for conducting a needs assessment states that at a minimum the process of assessing needs shall be carried out for the following eleven program classifications: 1) kindergarten, 2) primary (grades 1-3), 3) elementary (grades 4-8) high school (grades 9-12), 5) handicapped; educable mentally handicapped, learning disabled, 6) handicapped; trainable mentally handicapped, emotionally handicapped, orthopedically handicapped, 7) handicapped; visually handicapped, hearing handicapped, 8) speech handicapped, 9) homebound, 10) pre-vocational, and 11) vocational. This specification does not require that a needs assessment be limited to these areas only. If a school or school district so desires and has the available resources, other aspects of the educational program may also be assessed.

For each of the eleven program classifications the school and school district must decide which items will be assessed. As mentioned in a previous section of this document, resources, curriculum programs, and student performance may be assessed. In some cases, federal and state legislation as well as the Defined Minimum Program specify requirements or standards which must be met for each classification. In addition to assessing "what is" in relation to these standards, each school or district may wish to expand the scope of the assessment and include standards established by the school and district for each classification. The extent or depth of the assessment will depend on the intent or motivation of the school or school district and on its available resources.

On March 15, 1978 the South Carolina Legislature passed a Joint Resolution which requires that each school principal in cooperation with the school advisory council prepare by June 30 portions of the annual school report required

in the Finance Act. The Resolution requires that the report 1) depict the program offered in each pupil classification, and 2) recommend needed programmatic improvements in each classification including needs, goals, and objectives. The Resolution further requires that each school district board of trustees prepare by August 15 portions of the annual district report. This report is to include 1) a written appraisal of each school report, and 2) an evaluation of the district's program needs, goals and objectives.

The Joint Resolution was passed in an effort to ensure proper implementation of the Finance Act by prescribing dates for the preparation of the aforementioned reports. Since the required reports must be prepared in the very near future, schools and school districts are limited in the amount of time which can be devoted to conducting a needs assessment. Consequently, the needs assessment carried out during the first year of implementation of the Act may be less comprehensive than is desired. It is anticipated, however, that during the second year of implementation, schools and school districts would have ample time to design and conduct a comprehensive assessment of the needs of their educational programs.

Realizing the time constraint imposed on schools and school districts by the Resolution, the Department of Education has prepared a set of forms to assist administrators in reporting the required information during this first year. These forms have been mailed to each district superintendent. The Department anticipates that the forms required the first year of implementation will be revised to accommodate a more indepth and comprehensive assessment in 1978-79.

The next four pages are sample worksheets which can be used to assist administrators, if they wish, in organizing the data needed for completing the required forms. These worksheets have been completed using sample data and are only examples; they would not be submitted as part of the overall report.

SPECIAL NOTE:

For the 1978 report only, the four classifications for handicapped and the homebound classification have been collapsed into one: the data for each of these groups should be reported under one pupil classification simply referred to as "Handicapped." The classifications of pre-vocational and vocational have been collapsed into one pupil classification referred to as "Vocational."

SAMPLE

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

for

Elementary
Pupil Classification

NEEDS:	RECOMMENDED OBJECTIVES:
Two teachers need to obtain proper certification in their area of instruction.	By January 1, 1979, two teachers who are employed at this school who lack proper certification should take the necessary courses to meet the certification requirements in their area of instruction.
Twenty students need additional remedial reading instruction.	By September 1, 1978, a new remedial reading program based on the language experience approach should be initiated in this school to serve at least twenty children who need additional remedial reading instruction.
Two additional math labs are needed.	By January 1, 1979, this school should install two additional math labs to meet the needs of all slow learners.
An additional ten percent of the students in this school need to be scoring above the lowest quartile on the CTBS in social studies.	By May, 1979, the social studies program in this school should be strengthened so that no more than thirty percent will score in the lowest quartile.
Student behavior needs to be improved and the number of disciplinary referrals to the principal's office needs to be reduced by twenty percent of the student body.	By June, 1979, disciplinary referrals of students to the principal's office should be reduced by ten percent of the student body.
The lunch room space should be expanded and new tables and chairs should be added so that all students can eat in two lunch periods.	By September, 1979, this school should expand the cafeteria and add equipment necessary to feed all students in two periods.

SAMPLE

SAMPLE

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

for

Elementary
Pupil Classification

STUDENT PERFORMANCE AREA

CRITERIA (What should be)	STATUS (What is)	DIFFERENCE (Discrepancy)
Not more than twenty-five percent of the students in this school should be scoring in the lowest quartile on the CTBS in social studies.	Thirty-five percent are presently scoring in the lowest quartile of the CTBS.	Ten percent of the students in this school scoring in the lowest quartile on the CTBS in social studies should not be.
No more than five percent of the students in this school should be sent to the school principal for disciplinary action during the school year.	Twenty-five percent of the students have been sent to the principal one or more times.	Disciplinary referrals exceed the standard by twenty percent of the student body.

SAMPLE

SAMPLE

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

for

Elementary

Pupil Classification

CURRICULUM AREA

CRITERIA (What should be)	STATUS (What is)	DIFFERENCE (Discrepancy)
Three math labs are necessary to meet the needs of all slow learners in this school.	Presently this school has one math lab.	Two additional labs are needed.
Remedial reading should be provided to 50 students who are reading two or more years below grade level.	Thirty students are receiving remedial reading instruction.	Remedial reading instruction should be provided to twenty additional students who presently are reading two or more years below grade level.

SAMPLE

SAMPLE

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

for

Elementary
Pupil Classification

RESOURCES AREA

CRITERIA (What should be)	STATUS (What is)	DIFFERENCE (Discrepancy)
The lunch room facilities should be expanded so that all students can be fed during two lunch periods.	There are currently three periods for lunch in this school.	This school should reduce its present three lunch periods to two lunch periods.
All teachers should be properly certified in their area of instruction.	Eighteen of the twenty teachers in this school have met all certification requirements and are properly certified.	Two teachers are lacking the required number of college credits to be properly certified.

SAMPLE